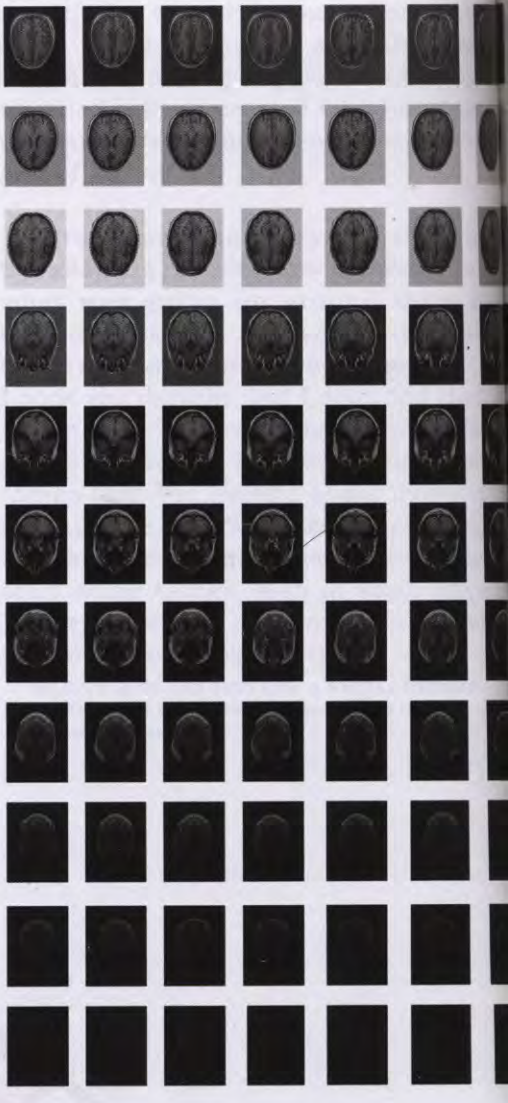
MIND GAM

MAVERICK PHILOSOPHER NICK LAND CHANGED THE WAY THE LIKES OF KODE9, SIMON REYNOLDS AND JAKE CHAPMAN THOUGHT ABOUT MUSIC AND ART. MARK FISHER, A FORMER STUDENT OF LAND'S, ASSESSES HIS LEGACY

"Is Nick Land the most important British philosopher of the last 20 years?" asks Kodwo Eshun. The question might seem like an odd one – Land only published one book, *The Thirst For Annihilation: Georges Bataille And Virulent Nihilism* and a series of short texts, most of which had a limited circulation when they first appeared. Nevertheless, Eshun's question makes sense because that small canon of texts – collected for the first time in a recently published volume *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007* – have had an enormous, but until now, subterranean influence. Their impact was first of all felt beyond philosophy – in music (Steve Goodman aka Kode9 studied with Land in the 90s), in art (Jake Chapman has long been an admirer of Land's "technilism"; Eshun, in the 90s one of the most important writers on music, is now a member of the Turner Prize-nominated Otolith Group), in the inhuman feminism of Luciana Parisi's *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology And The Mutations Of Desire*, and in the unclassifiable theory-fiction of Iranian writer Reza Negarestani, whose astonishing *Cyclonopedia* was rated by *Artforum* as one of the best books of 2009. "Land had instant implications for those few artists I knew who read him," says Chapman. "The combination of delirium and the crispest thinking turned the political pessimism of the time into an intensive fatalism that was productive without reserve. Land somehow stamped his mark on the death-drive, and anyone who had the courage to read his work was pulled along in the wake."

Land's influence is also now infesting the philosophy departments which tended to scorn it in the rare cases they were aware of it. Some of the philosophers at the forefront of the most exciting movement in current philosophy, "speculative realism" – Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant – studied with Land, and their work is still marked by that encounter. The re-propagation of Land's work via speculative realism has led younger theorists such as Ben Woodard, author of the forthcoming *Slime Dynamics*, which crossbreeds philosophy, science and horror fiction, back to Land. "Land's work was a welcome respite from much of the philosophy I had been reading at the time," says Woodard, "His *Thirst For Annihilation* is one of the more interesting texts I've read in several years as it lampoons the hubris of philosophers while managing to be a work of theory at the same time. Land demonstrated that one could make rigorous theoretical arguments without being afraid to engage with unorthodox materials."

In the 90s, Land was what the music critic Simon Reynolds once called a "vortical presence", capable of utterly transforming those with whom he came into contact, and it's a description Kodwo Eshun considers accurate. "What struck me upon meeting Nick Land at an event in Brighton's Zap Club in 1993 or 1994 was his presence," he says. "His manner was immediately open, egalitarian and absolutely unaffected by academic protocol and his style of speaking was extremely vivid – he dramatised theory as a geopolitico-historical epic and he narrated philosophy in the present tense as a series of personifications that drew equally upon Isaac Asimov, Norbert Wiener, Alan Turing, Ridley Scott and William Gibson. When you were in Nick's presence, thinking mattered. It took on a mortal quality – it became enlivened, libidinised, intensified... and it made demands upon you. Many, if not all of those people that made contact with Nick Land have since gone on to make names for themselves in literature, in electronic dance music, in art, in fiction... It is clear to me now that those encounters with Nick were intensifying experiences. After Nick, one could not turn back towards a homeland of thought. There was no homeland left to return to."



I was one of those who underwent this dislocating encounter. Along with a handful of others, including

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Steve Goodman, Luciana Parisi and Robin Mackay, the editor of the *Collapse* journal and the man behind Urbanomic, the publishers of *Fanged Noumena*, I was a founding member of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU). The CCRU was convened by Land's former collaborator, Sadie Plant, but, when Plant departed, the Unit became shaped by Land's ideas and methodology. Although the CCRU was notionally a part of the Philosophy department, it never had any formal institutional status. As one Warwick academic memorably put it, "The CCRU does not, has not and will never exist." This institutional non-existence parallels Land's own strange situation – a philosopher whom few professional philosophers acknowledge.

I still recall very vividly the first time I encountered Land's cyber-writings. I had read *Thirst For Annihilation* but it didn't really work for me; even though I appreciated its experimental form and the way that it tried to become its subject (the work of the French anti-philosopher Georges Bataille) rather than judge it from some supposedly neutral vantage point, there was still something self-conscious about it. It was the piece "Machinic Desire" that first took hold of me. I remember reading it, then immediately re-reading it two or three times. There was a great deal of cyber-theory around in the 1990s but none of it seemed to come from inside the machines – which is to say, outside us – in the way that Land's did. The writing didn't have the distance that one expects from academic theory, it dealt with fiction and film as terrains to be occupied rather than as artefacts to be "commented" upon. It found a "plane of consistency" where the cyberpunk fiction of William Gibson connected up with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant; where *Blade Runner* connected with finance capital. Theory wasn't being "applied" here; it was being plugged in. The writing felt as if it came from somewhere real, somewhere exterior, rather than from a psychological interiority. The whole thing was suffused by a reckless integrity: it was entirely lacking in the dampening caution and cynicism which makes so much careerist academic writing dull. There was the unmistakable feeling that you get whenever you encounter an authentic project: the sense that this had to be written.

"I completely share your thoughts about *Thirst For Annihilation*," says Steve Goodman, "which to me read like a writer trying to liberate themselves from the shackles of being trained in academic theory/philosophy. Of course most people who are academically trained one way or another, including myself, don't get past the pain, angst and friction such a quest generates, which is ultimately why much 'radical' post-Nietzschean academic theory is so tedious and adolescent, but it's certainly a worthwhile quest. But what is interesting about Nick, is that his response to this hyper-rational prison of academic philosophy was not to retreat from it, but to accelerate it to a point where it implodes, perhaps taking him with it. So instead of retreating from theory, he actually seemed to understand it better than the most dutiful academic bureaucrat ever could. And this is what made him, at that time, such an amazing teacher. Anyway, I remember coming across one of Nick's articles called 'Cyberspace Anarchitecture and Jungle Warfare' at some point in the mid-90s. This was a moment at which we were all massively stimulated by jungle not just as a music, but as a theory-generating machine. The article had nothing in particular to do with jungle music in a literal sense, but the more I read it, the more this abstract landscape that it seemed to be mapping was exactly the same one created by the music. I read it about ten times and still didn't completely get it, but the sense of the concreteness of its content... it's the lack of distance but also the sense that what it was describing we were all familiar with already, was so compelling – often the concepts seeped in by osmosis, through repeated reading."

"I think Nick's writing after *Thirst For Annihilation* reminds you of this psychedelic function of theory, where it has this potential to strip back all the crusted, dead layers of the catastrophe that we usually refer to as the human race," he continues, "to zoom into this somewhat reptilian, info-material core, with a cold indifference but simultaneously an intense excitement."

Land's texts were never "about" 90s experimental dance music so much as they converged with it. "Clearly he was drawing for a shared set of cinematic references that were in the musical air at that moment," says Goodman. "But the thing that always got me about the resonance between Nick's writing and jungle was this theme of *turbulence* that seemed to recur across his writings, at dynamic, social, mathematical, physical, economic and libidinal scales... his interest in the productivity of systems on the edge of chaos, for me, was basically a direct and very literal description of what was going on rhythmically in jungle with breakbeat science. On one level, Nick was around 15 years ahead of the curve, which is why what he was saying is still so current now."

FANGED NOUMENA is published by Urbanomic
BLACK SUN by KODE9 & THESPACEAPE is out now

Left: ROMANTIC LOVE (FROM TOP TO BOTTOM), by CECILE B EVANS, work in progress